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Corporate Social Responsibility programs of Big Food in Australia: a content analysis of industry documents

Zoe Richards

University of Wollongong, znr953@uowmail.edu.au

Samantha L. Thomas

University of Wollongong, slthomas@uow.edu.au

Melanie J. Randle

University of Wollongong, mrandle@uow.edu.au

Simone Pettigrew

Curtin University

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Keywords

australia, food, big, programs, responsibility, social, documents, corporate, industry, analysis, content

Disciplines

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Introduction

Global 'unhealthy commodity' corporations profit from increased consumption of unhealthy products (e.g. alcohol, tobacco and processed food and beverages), thereby contributing to the development of non-communicable disease epidemics.¹⁻³ Public health advocates have called for increased focus on the tactics used by these companies to promote their products and resist reforms that aim to prevent or minimise the harms caused.^{1,3-5} Such tactics are used

by companies to build their powerbase within societies, including the creation of both ‘soft power’ (by influencing culture, ideas and cognitions of the public, public health advocates and health scientists) and ‘hard power’ (by building financial and institutional relations).³ By creating an environment in which continued consumption is encouraged, profits can increase and regulation and government intervention can be avoided. While there is extensive knowledge about the tactics used by some types of global corporations (e.g. tobacco),⁶⁻¹⁰ there is less understanding of the range of tactics used by other industries (e.g. processed junk food and drink companies – ‘Big Food’). Initial studies suggest Big Food is now employing similar tactics to those of Big Tobacco in response to growing societal health concerns.^{2,11} Previously, most research into the marketing strategies of Big Food has focused on product promotion.¹²⁻¹⁵ These studies have explored the nature and content of marketing messages and the impact of these on consumer behaviour. Less is known about other marketing and public relations strategies of Big Food. To illustrate the types of activities this may include, the following section highlights current evidence regarding key strategies used by Big Tobacco and Big Food to protect their products from regulatory reforms.^{2,6,7,11,16,17} The first strategy is the use of public relations campaigns and public statements to state company concerns about the health of their customers and populations. For example, Big Tobacco invested substantial money into public relations efforts to deflect consumer criticism by arguing that cigarette companies do not encourage abuse of the product, they simply provide choice and recommend moderate consumption.¹⁸ The second strategy involves tactical campaigns that emphasise freedom of choice and personal responsibility to encourage consumers to oppose regulation of the industry.^{2,3,16,17} These types of initiatives emphasise self-control and hold individuals accountable for their own purchasing and consumption choices.¹⁹ Big Food highlights individual responsibility through messages of moderation that appear on packaging. For example, food products produced by Mondeléz International that are high in sugar contain the words ‘Be Treat Wise’ on their exterior.²⁰ The third strategy is the use of lobbying tactics. Large corporations invest heavily in lobbying to influence politicians and block or stall regulatory efforts.^{2,3,21} For example, Phillip Morris made large campaign contributions to politicians’ pet causes in an effort to exert political influence at federal and state levels.¹⁰ Lobbying activities may also occur via industry-funded ‘front groups’. For instance, Big Food funds groups that work to oppose regulation of marketing to children, front-of-pack nutrition labelling and taxes on unhealthy foods.²² The fourth strategy involves co-opting policy makers and health professionals. To undermine public health intervention and policies, Big Food promote partnerships with health experts and professional

organisations.^{3,16} Finally, the fifth strategy is funding research, which some argue is used to generate data supporting the industry's position and produces biased research findings.³

Recently, researchers have questioned the role of a specific industry tactic – Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, which are often used to positively promote products, brands and industries to communities.²³ CSR has been described as an evolving practice that has come to include “companies’ economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities to society, in addition to the company’s fiduciary responsibility to shareholders”.²³ When companies acknowledge and act on these responsibilities, they are considered a ‘good corporate citizen’.² Advocates of CSR argue that it can help companies meet these responsibilities while addressing ‘higher’ social obligations.²³ To meet the requirements of groups beyond their shareholders, companies may implement CSR activities to address societal concerns. In doing so, they claim to accept an ethical obligation to the public at large.^{24,25} However, critics of CSR claim that such strategies are simply public relations initiatives designed to achieve ‘innocence by association’ as companies protect their profitability by aligning themselves with social causes to improve their public image and avoid regulation.^{10,23,26} Using this approach, companies are able to deflect blame from their organisation on to individual consumers.²⁷ CSR initiatives were initially implemented by Big Tobacco companies in the 1950s after scientific evidence established a causal link between smoking and lung cancer.⁸ With this evidence came a decline in social acceptance of tobacco products that led to companies implementing CSR programs aimed at improving their corporate image and preventing legal and regulatory action.^{8,10,23} For example, Philip Morris sought to improve its image by funding youth smoking cessation programs and aligning itself with antidomestic violence campaigns.¹⁰ Less is known about how Big Food employs CSR tactics and the effects these strategies may have on consumption intentions. Gomez et al.²⁸ provided several examples of CSR programs in Latin and South America by beverage company Coca Cola. These included nutrition education and physical activity programs that promoted the adoption of a healthy lifestyle. Gomez et al.²⁸ suggested that Coca Cola implemented such programs to divert public attention away from the negative health effects of its products, with scientific evidence linking sugar-sweetened beverages to increasing rates of childhood overweight and obesity. Dorfman et al.²³ examined CSR campaigns implemented by Coca Cola and PepsiCo and outlined their specific intentions of increasing sales among youth, shifting blame from companies to individual consumers and preventing public regulation. Dorfman et al.²³ suggested that CSR campaigns implemented by Big Food

differed from Big Tobacco in relation to increasing product sales, as companies such as Coca Cola and PepsiCo have the potential to entice youth to become loyal, lifetime consumers by creating an emotional bond with their brands. This may contribute to the already alarmingly high rates of non-communicable diseases among individuals in these age groups.²⁹ Public health experts assert that companies that invest in CSR initiatives are creating a conflict of interest when their products contribute to the burden of ill health (e.g. obesity) in the first place.² This study aimed to address the gap in knowledge relating to the CSR tactics of Big Food in Australia, and provide a template for monitoring these tactics over time.

To achieve this aim, the following research questions were addressed:

1. Which types of CSR initiatives are being implemented by major Big Food companies in Australia?
2. Who are the intended target audiences for these CSR activities?

Methods

Approach

A mixed method content analysis was conducted on a sample of Australian Big Food websites. Primary data sources included company CSR reports and web-based content that related to CSR initiatives in Australia. Company websites and CSR reports were considered suitable information sources for the purposes of this study because organisations typically use these documents to promote their major CSR initiatives to consumers.³⁰

Sample

To increase the generalisability of results, a range of Big Food categories were included to represent: a) fast food; b) sugar sweetened beverages; and c) packaged foods high in sugar, fat and/or salt. Using the academic literature and corporate documents available to the authors, companies were selected for inclusion based on the following subjective considerations. Companies were considered for inclusion if they displayed evidence of a formal CSR strategy and provided detailed information about these initiatives on their websites. Following this, a literature search was conducted using two databases, Scopus and Web of Science, to find evidence of previous CSR activities used by the companies initially identified.

Companies found in the literature base were considered for inclusion.^{2,13,14,23,27,31,32} Initially, 11 companies were identified in the search. These companies produced either fast food (n=3),

sugar sweetened beverages (n=2), or packaged foods (n=6) as their primary product category. Of these, six were extensively reviewed in the literature, and also provided detailed information about their CSR strategies specific to Australia via their corporate websites. Based on these considerations, the final sample included the Australian branches of: 1) Coca Cola; 2) McDonald's; 3) PepsiCo; 4) Nestlé; 5) Mars; and 6) Mondelez International (owner of Kraft and Cadbury)

Development of the coding framework

An adapted version of the Inclusive Social Rating Criteria (ISRC) ³³ was used to collect relevant data from the collated documents. This tool was originally developed to analyse and evaluate the overall corporate social performance of a range of commercial organisations. It includes seven categories (Community, Corporate Governance, Diversity, Employee Relations, Environment, Human Rights and Product). The ISRC was used as the starting coding framework, and then modified to develop a new coding tool that more accurately summarised the CSR activities of the industry under investigation. This process involved: 1) retaining some of the original categories within the ISRC that captured CSR activities relevant to the study; 2) removing the categories of Corporate Governance, Human Rights and Product due to their low relevance to the information contained in the sources utilised; and 3) creating three new categories (Consumer Responsibility, Partnerships, Indigenous) to capture specific types of CSR activities employed by Big Food that were not represented within the original framework. The ISRC framework classified CSR strategies targeting specific populations within the broader Community category. The CSR strategies identified through the course of the present review identified numerous strategies that specifically targeted one particular group – the Indigenous population. These strategies were considerably different in their focus from the other CSR strategies within the Community category, which instead focused primarily on families and children across the broader population. To reflect this focus on Indigenous peoples, and the potential for this to be a common theme in other countries that also include Indigenous populations, a separate category was created to capture Indigenous-specific CSR strategies. The inclusion of this additional category will enable similar strategies to be mapped in future, both in Australia and abroad. The new categories were developed using qualitative thematic analysis techniques to group identified strategies that weren't aligned with existing categories of the ISRC framework. Definitions of the relevant individual CSR activities are provided in Table 1. Based on the resulting framework,

a coding spreadsheet was prepared allowing CSR activities to be categorised and the intended target audience to be recorded.

Table 1. CSR categories and definitions

Category	Definition
Environment	Activities that aim to reduce or prevent environmental impact, for example by sponsoring national environmental campaigns, endorsing government initiatives, adopting responsible sourcing practices, packaging initiatives, and various programs that focused on saving or recycling resources (e.g., litter, water, energy).
Consumer Responsibility	Activities relating to the responsible marketing initiatives and policies of the company in relation to health, for example health initiatives, provision of nutrition and health information, and resources that promote healthy behaviour.
Community	Activities relating to the support of community programs and events, for example supporting sporting events, non-profit organisations and volunteer programs.
Partnerships	Activities relating to partnerships formed between companies and professional and not-for-profit organisations to advance and promote research, and foster community development.
Employee Relations	Activities that provide professional development and education opportunities for staff members, implementation of equal employment policies, and programs that promote employee health and wellbeing.
Indigenous	Activities that support not-for-profit organisations that implement programs for the Indigenous population, for example developing leadership and mentoring skills, promoting sport, and improving public space, and infrastructure in Indigenous communities.
Diversity	Programs aimed at populations identified as experiencing disadvantage, for example migrant populations, disadvantaged youth, and individuals with disabilities.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected and analysed in a series of steps in April 2014. First, websites were scanned for relevant information. Dropdown tabs with links to information on responsibility to communities, well-being of communities and community development were searched to identify relevant information according to the CSR categories identified. The information from each website was saved into a Word document, along with a screen shot of each website address to allow website information to be revisited if clarification was required. The most recent annual CSR reports were downloaded to capture any information not available on the company's website. The same data collection process was repeated one week later to check that all relevant material had been captured. A coding spreadsheet was prepared to facilitate categorisation of the CSR activities and recording of the intended target audience. A target audience was determined based on the CSR activity descriptions and related images in the coded content. In particular, discernible demographic factors (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, education, employment status) and the benefits promoted were used to identify the likely target audience. Where an activity could potentially be placed in more than one category, the category deemed to be most dominant was selected. All data collection and coding was performed by the first author. Peer debriefing was employed to ensure that the data collected were valid, and were coded and categorised correctly. Once the coding was finalised, SPSS was used to generate basic descriptive statistics by category and industry group in the form of frequency counts. Differences and similarities in CSR activities were then analysed across companies.

Results

Two hundred and fifty-six CSR activities were identified (Table 2). Of these, the majority fell into the categories of: Environment (30.5%), Consumer Responsibility (25.0%) and Community (19.5%). McDonald's reported the most CSR activities (n=85, 33.2% of the sample) and PepsiCo the least (n=14, 5.4%).

Table 2. CSR initiatives by company and CSR category

Company	Environment	Consumer Responsibility	Community	Employee Relations	Partnerships	Indigenous	Diversity	Total
McDonald's	32 (41.0%) <i>(27.6%)</i>	10 (15.6%) <i>(11.8%)</i>	20 (40.0%) <i>(23.5%)</i>	16 (59.3%) <i>(18.8%)</i>	6 (24.0%) <i>(7.1%)</i>	0 (0%) <i>(0%)</i>	1 (20.0%) <i>(1.2%)</i>	85 (33.2) <i>(100.0)</i>
Nestlé	27 (34.6%) <i>(32.9%)</i>	24 (37.5%) <i>(29.3%)</i>	8 (16.0%) <i>(9.8%)</i>	5 (18.5%) <i>(6.1%)</i>	15 (60.0%) <i>(18.3%)</i>	3 (42.9%) <i>(3.7%)</i>	0 (0%) <i>(0%)</i>	82 (32.0) <i>(100.0)</i>
Coca-Cola	2 (2.6%) <i>(5.4%)</i>	16 (25.0%) <i>(43.2%)</i>	9 (18.0%) <i>(24.3%)</i>	0 (0%) <i>(0%)</i>	2 (8.0%) <i>(5.4%)</i>	4 (57.1%) <i>(10.8%)</i>	4 (80.0%) <i>(10.8%)</i>	37 (14.5) <i>(100.0)</i>
Mars	6 (7.7%) <i>(30.0%)</i>	5 (7.8%) <i>(25.0%)</i>	7 (14.0%) <i>(35.0%)</i>	1 (3.7%) <i>(5.0%)</i>	1 (4.0%) <i>(5.0%)</i>	0 (0%) <i>(0%)</i>	0 (0%) <i>(0%)</i>	20 (7.8) <i>(100.0)</i>
Mondeléz International	8 (10.3%) <i>(44.4%)</i>	5 (7.8%) <i>(27.8%)</i>	4 (8.0%) <i>(22.2%)</i>	0 (0%) <i>(0%)</i>	1 (4.0%) <i>(5.6%)</i>	0 (0%) <i>(0%)</i>	0 (0%) <i>(0%)</i>	18 (7.0) <i>(100.0)</i>
PepsiCo	3 (3.8%) <i>(21.4%)</i>	4 (6.3%) <i>(28.6%)</i>	2 (4.0%) <i>(14.3%)</i>	5 (18.5%) <i>(35.7%)</i>	0 (0%) <i>(0%)</i>	0 (0%) <i>(0%)</i>	0 (0%) <i>(0%)</i>	14 (5.5) <i>(100.0)</i>
Total	78 (100.0) <i>(30.5)</i>	64 (100.0) <i>(25.0)</i>	50 (100.0) <i>(19.5)</i>	27 (100.0) <i>(10.5)</i>	25 (100.0) <i>(9.8)</i>	7 (100.0) <i>(2.7)</i>	5 (100.0) <i>(2.0)</i>	256 (100.0) <i>(100.0)</i>

Note: Figures in parentheses refer to column percentages and italicised figures in parentheses refer to row percentages.

Environment

Diverse ranges of activities were included in the Environment category; however, they clustered into four key themes. The first Environment theme involved sustainability and responsible sourcing programs (n=31). These programs included sustainable practice committees, implementation of sustainable practices (e.g. McDonald's Sustainable Footprint Assessment, which monitors energy usage and carbon emissions) and responsible resourcing practices (e.g. Mars sources Rainforest Alliance Certified cocoa). The second theme was packaging initiatives (n=19). For example, Nestlé disclosed six packaging initiatives as part of their 'Sustainability Hero Projects' program, which aimed to reduce the environmental impact of packaging material by 15%. The third theme concerned programs that focused on saving or recycling resources (n=25) and involved recycling litter, water or energy. For instance, companies described the implementation of a range of recycling, water, and energy saving programs (e.g. Mondeléz International's REDCycle Program, which recovers and recycles units of plastic bags and packaging material from supermarkets). The last theme was the endorsement of government initiatives (n=3), and included the sponsorship of government-led campaigns such as 'Earth Hour' (e.g. Mars) and 'Clean up Australia Day' (e.g. McDonald's). The documented environmental initiatives appeared to target the Australian population as a whole, rather than one specific group. The descriptions provided indicated that the environmental practices undertaken were to benefit the wider community, bring community members together to address environmental issues, or preserve the environment in general. To illustrate, PepsiCo stated that the company was "committed to minimising their environmental impact", and focused their environmental sustainability efforts on "water, energy and waste minimisation as areas where they can make the biggest impact".

Consumer Responsibility

Numerous activities that clustered around five key themes within the category of Consumer Responsibility were identified. The first Consumer Responsibility theme was the provision of nutrition and physical activity information (n=42). For instance, Coca Cola provided access to a range of health information resources (e.g. Clear on Kilojoules, which outlined the kilojoule content on each product). The second theme concerned the implementation of health initiatives (n=10). Nestlé promoted a number of nutrition focused initiatives, including a program that aimed to help consumers understand the importance of portion control (e.g. Portion Plate Education). The third theme involved responsible marketing initiatives (n=6).

McDonald's reported that they adhered to the 'Quick Service Restaurant Initiative' that requires signatories to avoid advertising their products to children younger than 12 years of age during children's peak television viewing times. The fourth theme concerned the reformulation of products (n=4). Nestlé, for example, reported that its product range has lower saturated fat, sodium and sugar compared to previously. The removal of food products from school canteens (n=2) was the fifth theme. To illustrate, PepsiCo reported that they had elected to cease supplying vending machines to primary schools. Instead, they provide a 'smart option' range of snacks in vending machines in high schools and health facilities. Children and parents appeared to be the primary target audience for activities within the Consumer Responsibility category. This was evidenced by the companies' focus on providing resources and information, often accessed and interpreted by parents, and restricting access to and promotion of products to children in certain settings and at certain times of the day. For instance, Mondeléz International emphasised the importance of "marketing to children" in a "sensible and responsible manner" when describing the company's adherence to the Australian Food and Grocery Council's Responsible Marketing Initiative.

Community

Activities in the Community category clustered around three key themes. The first Community theme involved the provision of funding or in-kind support for local charities or national not-for-profit organisations (n=25). These included: fundraising events (e.g. Paws in the Park, Mars); provision of services for specific community groups (e.g. Ronald McDonald House Charity, McDonald's); and opportunities for organisations to receive funding for programs (e.g. Community Grant Scheme, Coca Cola). The second theme concerned the sponsorship and implementation of community sport programs and events (n=21). For instance, McDonald's reported that it sponsors Little Athletics Australia and has also implemented physical activity programs and events, including the Sydney Eisteddfod. The final key theme was the implementation of volunteer programs (n=4). For example, Mondeléz International and PepsiCo reported that they have established employee volunteer programs that provide their staff with one day of paid leave per year to volunteer at local community charities. The primary target audience for these activities appeared to be parents and their children. This was evidenced by the companies' primary focus on providing sponsorship for sporting and health programs, offering physical activity opportunities and nutrition education to children. Promotional images of this target group were also used to

advertise the activities identified. For example, Coca Cola used an image of children and their parents riding bicycles to promote the 'Bicycle Network' program.

Employee Relations

Activities in the Employee Relations category clustered around three key themes. The first theme included training and leadership development opportunities (n=10). To illustrate, McDonald's reported that it provides employees with education opportunities (e.g. McDonald's Virtual Business School). Similarly, PepsiCo stated that it offers staff an opportunity to increase their job-related skills through the 'PepsiCo University', which offers learning opportunities focused on building managerial, networking and social skills. The second theme focused on equal opportunities in the workplace and methods to attain employment (n=13). To illustrate, McDonald's reported that it sanctions the Equal Opportunity in the Workplace Agency Employer of Choice for Women citation, which acknowledges the company's commitment to providing pay equity for women. The final theme identified was the implementation of employee health and wellness programs (n=4). For example, Mars reported that it has an 'Associate Wellness Program', which provides corporate staff with services such as discounted gym memberships, smoking-cessation plans and health checks. The intended target audience of activities in the employee relations category appeared to be current employees (to encourage retention) and aspiring potential employees (to build a positive image as an employer of choice). For instance, McDonald's depicted these activities using images of happy employees, and provided detailed descriptions of how the company works "to provide an employment experience" that their "employees will always value".

Partnerships

Activities relating to Partnerships centred around two key themes. The first theme involved partnerships with professional organisations and associations (n=14). McDonald's, for instance, reported that it is affiliated with the Dieticians Association of Australia, whereby it aims to develop healthier menu options. The second theme concerned partnerships with non-profit organisations (n=11). To illustrate, Mondeléz International partnered with the 'Humour Foundation' to establish 'Clown Doctors' in all major children's hospitals in Australia.

Companies partnered with numerous professional and non-profit organisations with varying objectives, which made it difficult to isolate one audience. Therefore, an exact target group was unable to be established for this category.

Indigenous

Activities in the Indigenous category primarily focused on Indigenous youth development and clustered around two key themes. The first Indigenous theme involved programs that aimed to develop skills and knowledge to increase higher education and employment opportunities among Indigenous youth (n=5). For example, Coca Cola reported that it provides funding for the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience program, a structured education-mentoring program that provides support to Indigenous students through high school and into university. The second theme concerned programs that offered opportunities to be physically active and develop skills related to health and nutrition (n=2). Nestlé, for instance, reported that it funds the ‘Mother and Daughter Program’ that teaches Indigenous girls and their mothers the value of healthy eating. The primary target audience of these activities appeared to be Indigenous youth. Descriptions of these activities specified that they were designed to support Indigenous youth in Australia. Images that depicted this target audience participating in activities were also used to promote initiatives. To illustrate, Nestlé used an image of Indigenous girls participating in a cooking activity in the ‘Mother and Daughter Program’.

Diversity

The activities relating to Diversity formed one key theme, namely initiatives that develop skills and increase employment opportunities for disadvantaged youth and disabled members of the community. For example, Coca Cola reported that it funds programs for disadvantaged community groups, such as the ‘Zone In’ program that offers high school students opportunities to seek help with education-related issues (e.g. assistance with assignments).

The target groups for these activities appeared to be migrants or disadvantaged youth. This was illustrated in the descriptions of these activities that specified the companies’ intentions of supporting these subgroups of the Australian population. For example, Coca Cola described their ‘On the Same Wave’ program as “helping migrants learn surf life-saving skills”

Discussion

The wide range of CSR strategies implemented by selected members of Big Food in Australia are presented in Table 2. While some of these strategies clearly target specific groups within the population, such as families with young children, it should be recognised that all CSR

activities either directly or indirectly target the population as a whole.² CSR strategies, by definition, work to develop a public image of a responsible and ‘good’ corporate citizen that is associated with positive attributes, and thus work to build brand awareness and preference within the population.²³ These findings raise three considerations that warrant reflection and discussion.

1. A focus on responsibility, both towards the environment and consumers

The two most common types of CSR activities focused on building brand image by depicting the company as a responsible corporate entity, both in terms of the natural environment and its attitude towards its customers. It is likely that this type of strategy is an attempt to address public commentary within the media and public policy forums that criticise Big Food for contributing to the burden of poor health and deliberately targeting vulnerable populations such as children or lower socio-demographic communities.^{22,34,35} This finding is consistent with previous literature suggesting that Big Food companies are irresponsible in their marketing and targeting strategies.² At the same time, organisations use CSR to counteract criticisms and promote themselves as responsible entities. In doing so, companies may obtain a degree of immunity to the effects of negative public commentary when it occurs.³⁶ Prior research indicates that the strategy of aligning with seemingly unrelated, but socially desirable, causes has been used by Big Tobacco in an attempt to build an overall image of corporate responsibility.¹⁰

Big Tobacco used this strategy in an attempt to maintain a positive industry image and create a platform from which they could enter tobacco policy discussions and re-establish political influence. The findings of this study suggest Big Food may be following a similar pathway as Big Tobacco by addressing societal concerns to influence policy-making decisions and thwart regulation.^{2,3,27}

2. Targeting families and children

The findings highlight a prevalence of CSR strategies in the area of community-based initiatives that seemingly target families with young children. Previous research has shown that Big Food companies’ CSR initiatives aim to build brand and product preference from a young age,^{2,23} which may entice young children and adolescents to become lifetime consumers.²³ Sponsoring children’s sporting events such as Little Athletics has a twofold impact: (1) it associates the brand with healthy physical activity, which may be perceived to offset the unhealthy nature of its products;^{37,38} and (2) the company may be viewed as helping

to sustain children's community sporting programs.³⁹ Numerous examples were found of Big Food companies supporting children's and family events and organisations (e.g. Coca Cola's Bicycle Network, Nestlé's Milo In2 Cricket program). As well as building a positive brand image with children, this strategy may work to alleviate the guilt parents feel when allowing their children to consume the unhealthy products produced by Big Food companies, as they can justify patronage of these organisations because of the good work they may create a halo effect where companies are perceived as 'healthy', which may lead to incorrect inferences about a product in terms of its nutritional content.^{40,41} These practices may undermine public health efforts to address the negative health implications of unhealthy commodity products such as those produced by Big Food.

3. An alignment with 'credible' organisations

Big Food corporations also appear to be using CSR strategies in effort to align themselves with respected, credible organisations and events in an attempt to transfer these qualities to their own brand. For example, Nestlé has affiliated itself with numerous professional and not-for-profit organisations. In the past, the tobacco company Philip Morris viewed associating its brand with respected not-for-profit organisations as "crucial",¹⁰ and employed specialised marketing teams to identify suitable organisations to partner with for "credibility, visibility and to reach target audiences".¹⁰ Furthermore, in an attempt to silence any opposition to their products, tobacco companies co-opted interest groups that may potentially oppose tobacco industry-funded CSR programs to avoid possible criticism in future.^{17,42} Through the same mechanisms, Big Food companies could potentially position themselves as credible corporations to consumers and use this position to oppose future regulatory reform.

Four limitations should be considered when interpreting these results. First, this was contained to a sample of six companies. A larger sample may have provided a more comprehensive overview of CSR strategies being implemented in Australia. However, each company has a substantial presence in Australia, as indicated by sales revenues.^{43,44} It is also possible that other valuable information exists beyond the sources utilised here. Our data collection was deliberately restricted to Australian corporate websites and CSR reports. A wider range of industry documents (e.g. annual reports) may provide additional insight as to the range of marketing strategies used by Big Food. Further, we cannot report on the financial value of the different CSR strategies considered here. Different types of CSR activities were considered in equal value, which may mask their relative role in an individual company's CSR portfolio or the CSR strategies of the industry as a whole. Finally, future research

should identify the influence different types of CSR strategies have on the brand perceptions held by different market segments, including potentially vulnerable groups and also policy makers.

This study identified a wide range of CSR strategies implemented by the Big Food industry, many of which appear to offer community benefits such as the administration of grant funding schemes. However, it can also be argued that Big Food uses CSR strategies to build positive brand images and consumer preferences, which leads to decreased perceptions of harm and increased consumption of potentially harmful products.²³ Still to be clarified is where the balance lies between Big Food companies' providing genuine community benefits through these strategies, and any longer-term negative public health consequences of increased consumption of potentially harmful products. Specifically, is there a point at which Big Food companies tip from being responsible corporate citizens acting in the community's best interest to deceptive organisations that use CSR strategies primarily to achieve profit goals at the expense of public health? Further research is required to examine the real costs and benefits of Big Food CSR strategies to determine their net value to the community, and indeed whether such a tipping point can be identified.

Implications for public health

Findings from this study provide evidence for public health advocates and researchers to map and monitor the marketing tactics used by Big Food companies to sell their products to communities. Through the use of CSR (e.g. sponsorship of children's sporting activities) companies can influence consumer opinions regarding certain brands or products without explicitly promoting an unhealthy commodity product, which is the case with direct advertising. Results also highlight the types of CSR strategies being used by Big Food. This knowledge could be used to educate communities about how businesses use CSR to build market share and consumer loyalty. Future research should extend this line of enquiry by examining the value of corporate investments in the various CSR activities and community reactions to them, in order to provide insight regarding the relative costs and benefits associated with different types of CSR initiatives.

Conclusion

Using a customised CSR strategy classification framework, this study examined the range of CSR tactics that are used by Big Food in Australia. Results suggest that Big Food is using CSR activities to: 1) build brand image through responsibility initiatives associated with the

environment and customers; 2) target parents and children through community activities; and 3) align themselves with respected organisations and events in an effort to transfer their image attributes to their own brands. Big Food appears to be emulating many of the same strategies as Big Tobacco, which suggests that public health experts should question the motivations for, and legitimacy of, such strategies. To make a stronger case for government intervention, public health advocates need to go beyond the focus on the health harms associated with specific Big Food product categories and expand research efforts to include Big Food's corporate behaviour.

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